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ABSTRACT

When student placement in French classes by achievement test scores and number of years of previous study became unreliable, the faculty of a university constructed a placement test of grammar and vocabulary for four intermediate courses. The test has been revised twice, with oral comprehension and reading items added, other items subtracted, and a section on student background inserted. The background questions yielded surprising results, revealing that most students had more than 2 years of previous language training. Half of those students registering for the intermediate course had had the prerequisite years of study but were often still underprepared. Most students were not taking the courses to fulfill requirements but because they expected to enjoy them, and expected to take more than one. Test administration before and after the semester provided valuable information on student progress, with achievement level at the end of some courses matching exactly the entry level needed for the next course, causing concern about teaching "to the test." Addition of oral and reading comprehension items apparently did not contribute to the test's predictive ability, however. Analysis of eight items shows the potential for confusion in responding. (MSE)

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DIAGNOSTIC TESTING: ONE FACULTY'S EXPERIENCE

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Like all universities, we have each fall the task of placing new students with previous study of French (more than 400 of them in our case) in an appropriate French course. New students can be placed in one of four different courses, numbered 501, Review of French, 503, Intermediate French, 504, Advanced Intermediate French, and 631, French Grammar and Speech. We once used scores on the CEEB Achievement Test in French as our primary placement instrument, but in recent years fewer and fewer students have been presenting achievement-test scores at entrance and so we had been obliged to place students on the basis of number of years of previous study. This proved to be less than satisfactory, given the diversity of secondary-school programs in French. Consequently, in the spring of 1985, a group of colleagues put together a multiple-choice test consisting of 96 items of grammar with a few vocabulary items, and that test was administered in the four courses mentioned above on the second day of classes in the fall semester of 1985.

After administering the first version of the test twice, in the fall of 1985 and that of 1986, we decided to ask a colleague in our Department of Education who specializes in testing instruments to run a series of analyses on our test and to recommend appropiate changes. We also decided that, beginning the following fall, we would administer the test at the beginning and end of each semester (the four courses in which the test is given are offered in both semesters). On the recommendation of our statistical specialist, we reduced the total number of items on the test from 96 to 80, so that all students would have a reasonable chance of finishing the test; and we added oral-comprehension and reading-comprehension sections to the exam. Moreover, we added a few questions concerning background in French in order to have a profile of the students registered in our courses. The test was revised a second time for this fall semester, by adding items to both the oral and reading comprehension sections and reducing correspondingly the number of grammatical items.

The background questions yielded some unexpected results.

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We learned, for instance, that fully 66% of students enrolling for 501 had had more than the two years of secondary-school French which we thought prepared adequately for the course. Many, however, (all but 7%) had had some interruption in their study of the language. For 39% of those students, the interruption had been greater than two years. Students, then, were probably well advised to try the lowest of the post-elementary courses.

Another interesting finding was that 50% of students enrolling in 503 had four years or more of previous study and no interruption of study. Clearly, they did not believe us when we said that three years were adequate preparation for the course, and, in many cases, they were right.

The most surprising and gratifying statistic of all was that, except in 501, most students were not taking our courses to meet requirements, but because they expected to enjoy them! They were given the choice under "Reasons for taking the course" of "foreign-language requirement," "general-education requirement," "major," "minor," or "other." "Other" was the most common response, although "minor" was an increasingly popular reason, the more advanced the student.

More students than we had thought at least <u>began</u> the semester thinking that they certainly or probably would take further French courses. In 501, the figure was 43%; in 503, 63%; in 504, 88%; and in 631, 93%. Moreover, the question on degree of interest elicited a more positive response than we had anticipated.

The studies done by our statistical expert on the data we had collected yielded other interesting and, in some cases, surprising information. Our decision to administer the test at the beginning and at the end of each semester, in which we had been encouraged by our colleague in Education, gave us valuable information on what kind of progress our students were making in our courses. Below, in Table 1, are a comparison of range of raw scores and mean raw scores in each of four courses at the four times last year when the tests were administered:

TABLE 1

COURSE	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	MAY
FREN 501				
Range	3 - 73	30 - 64	16 - 55	23 - 64
Mean	31.4	46.3	30.2	44.1

TABLE 1 (cont.)

COURSE	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	MAY
FREN 503				
Range	18 - 70	35 - 78	xxxx	20 - 75
Mean	45.8	54.1	47.8	49.7
FREN 504				
Range	37 - 74	47 - 75	xxxx	50 - 75
Mean	54.1	62.5	55.8	60.7
FREN 631				
Range	44 - 73	56 - 79	xxxx	54 - 80
Mean	59.6	69.3	61.4	66.4

We were intrigued to see how closely the mean score attained in December in one course matched the previous September's score in the next higher course. That seemed to indicate that the standards we had adopted for placement were accurate, but we also worried that we were "teaching to the test." Our statistician assured us that this result was a positive one in the sense that the test reflected those points which we considered essential and that we were actually teaching those points effectively in our courses. We were not surprised to learn that there is no clear relationship between score on the diagnostic test and final grade in the course, given that a large component of any final grade depends on regularity of work and on motivation. We were rather surprised, however, when we were told that addition of oral and reading comprehension sections did not appear to increase the reliability of the test as a predictor of success. We had assumed for years that new students in our courses were hard to teach because of diversity of preparation, some of them having almost totally neglected oral ability in their secondary-school French program and others having neglected reading. The diagnostic test did not seem to bear this out, however; students tended to perform at about the same level in all sections of the test, which suggests that no skill is totally neglected in secondary-school programs and also that all skills develop at a similar rate even though one of them may be emphasized in a given academic program.

To turn now to what can be learned by analysis of particular items on the test, I have chosen two questions each from the oral-comprehension and reading-comprehension sections of the test, and three from the grammar section. Before presenting Table 2, which is the analysis we receive on each item, I will give brief explanations of column headings:

BIS.R Biserial Correlation Coefficient, a figure indicating the relationship between the average total raw score of those passing the item and those failing it. A negative number indicates that the question does not serve to predict success!

DIFF Difficulty, on a scale from 0 to 20.

MN P The average total score of those selecting the correct answer to this item.

MN F The average total score of those not selecting the correct answer.

PCTP The percentage of those attempting the item who chose the correct answer.

TABLE 2

Qu'est-ce qui arrive?
a.C'est très beau. b.C'est un accident.
c.C'est mon ami. d.Il arrive en retard.

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	0.10	17.0	30.4	28.2	3.8	3	7	55	120	5
503	0.53	13.5	50.8	40.0	19.1	3	34	91	50	3
504	0.67	11.1	58.7	48.4	38.8	3	19	24	3	0
631	0.40	10.5	62.8	56.9	44.7	0	21	21	5	0

There are, obviously, two elements which must be recognized in order to come up with the correct answer. One is that "qu'est-ce qui" refers only to things; the other is the idiomatic use of the verb "arriver." Answers a. and d. are unresponsive--a fact which even students with minimal preparation recognize in the case of a. but not in the case of d., where the repetition of "arrive" seems to lead into error. The person/thing distinction, however, causes more hesitation; even in 631, students are evenly split between b., the correct answer, and c., which would be possible if "qu'est-ce qui" could refer to persons.

The question shown in Table 3 presents a similar problem and, in addition, has a phonetic-discrimination component which misleads:

TABLE 3

Qu'est-ce que tu attends?
a.De la musique. b.Mes parents.
c.L'arrivée de Jean. d.Ma petite amie.

TABLE 3 (cont.)

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	0.57	12.6	35.1	26.0	25.5	84	31	47	22	6
503	0.33	9.9	45.0	38.9	51.1	68	8	92	12	1
504	0.66	8.9	56.4	46.2	61.2	14	2	30	3	0
631	0.15	6.5	60.0	57.6	80.9	7	0	38	2	0

It is interesting to note that the person/thing distinction proves less confusing here than in the previous table. This probably means that "qu'est-ce que," the direct-object interrogative pronoun referring to things, is taught sooner than "qu'est-ce qui," the subject form. It may also be that "qui" interrogative is so firmly associated in students' minds with persons that its presence at the end of "qu'est-ce qui" is highly misleading. Whatever, the explanation may be, it is clear from Table 3 that answers b. and d., which refer to persons, command relatively little allegiance, even at the 501 level. Answer a., however, avoiding which depends on recognizing that the verb of the cue is not "entends/hear" but "attends/wait for," confuses many up to the level of 504.

Table 4 is, to my mind, particularly interesting as an indication of what needs to be taught again to new students:

TABLE 4

Nous sommes en retard mais ... n'a pas d'importance.
a.ce b.ce que c.c'est d.cela

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	-0.03	17.0	27.8	28.3	4.3	86	23	68	8	5
503	0.49	13.2	49.8	39.9	21.3	100	14	26	38	3
504	0.61	11.5	58.6	49.1	34.7	25	3	4	17	0
631	0.39	10.5	62.7	57.0	44.7	24	1	1	21	0

Answers b. and c. are way off the mark--a fact which is evident to students except for those whose preparation is minimal. To choose correctly between a. and d. depends on knowing that "ce" the pronoun can be used only as the subject of the verb "to be," and many students, even among those who have studied French for some time, are apparently not aware of that. Clearly, this is a point which needs to be emphasized, perhaps not in 501, the intensive review of first-year French, where even more basic concepts must be relearned, but certainly at the intermediate level.

The question in Table 5 seems valuable in the same fashion, but raises a difficult question of changing usage:

TABLE 5

Elle fait ... bonnes compositions.
a.de b.des c.du d.les

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	-0.03	16.2	27.6	28.3	5.9	11	107	6	64	2
503	0.30	14.9	48.0	41.3	10.6	19	125	1	35	1
504	0.36	13.1	57.0	51.1	41.3	11	33	1	4	0
631	0.30	10.9	62.2	57.7	41.3	19	23	0	4	1

Answer c. is, of course, the worst choice, since it is singular and the noun it modifies is plural. Even beginners, the analysis seems to suggest, can make that distinction accurately. A fair number of students in 501 and 503 choose the inappropriate definite article of answer d. To make the "right" choice between a. and b., however, depends on knowing about an exception which more and more francophones ignore, although grammar books continue to teach it and careful speakers continue to observe it. Perhaps we should not take time to teach that "des" becomes "de" when an adjective precedes the noun if most francophones do not speak that way, particularly since Table 5 suggests that we need to work on the distinction between the definite and indefinite articles.

The results indicated in Table 6 came as a great surprise to us:

TABLE 6

Etes-vous déjà marié? Non, je ne suis ... marié.
a.pas déjà b.pas encore c.plus d.jamais

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	0.09	14.5	29.7	28.1	13.3	94	22	12	36	26
503	0.50	13.2	50.2	40.1	21.3	74	34	4	48	21
504	0.46	12.8	58.2	50.6	24.5	23	12	2	12	0
631	0.41	8.7	61.8	55.8	63.0	9	29	2	6	1

Answers c. and d. are clearly wrong. The fact that a number of students chose d. is probably explained by failure to look carefully at the tense of the verb. It seemed to us, however, that the inappropriateness of answer a. was equally apparent. The only explanation for the popularity of answer a. which we could come up with was the conjecture

that many speakers of American English may find "not already" an acceptable response to a question containing "already."

The two samples from the reading-comprehension section of the test are perhaps less useful than those from other sections because large numbers of students failed to complete this section, which was the final one of the test. They are included for the sake of completeness; moreover, despite the partial results, they do tell something about the way students typically attack a reading passage.

The answers to the question in Table 7 suggest how easy it is to be misled by superficial similarities:

TABLE 7

Où habite-t-il?
a.Dans un appartement. b.Près de la ville.
c.Loin de la ville. d.A l'étranger.

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	0.43	11.3	32.7	26.2	37.4	2	61	98	2	27
503	0.74	8.8	48.4	34.6	62.2	0	97	58	1	1
504	0.46	8.0	54.6	47.4	69.4	0	34	15	0	0
631	0.57	6.6	61.4	52.4	80.4	0	37	9	0	1

Students read carefully enough to recognize that answers a. and d. do not at all relate to the content of the passage. In the passage, the speaker says that he lives "pas loin de la ville." Given the obvious negation, it is strange that so many students chose answer c., "loin de la ville," as correct. The mistake was perhaps due to students' failure to recognize the preposition "près de" and to trust their own logical instincts.

Finally, Table 8 is useful perhaps only in illustrating how easy it is to make wrong choices under stress:

TABLE 8

Que veulent les ouvriers?
a.Une semaine de travail plus courte.
b.Une augmentation de salaire.
c.Prendre la retraite à 35 ans.
d.Un syndicat.

TABLE 8 (cont.)

CRSE	BIS.R	DIFF	MN P	MN F	PCTP	A.	B.	C.	D.	OMIT
501	0.68	12.3	37.5	26.7	28.0	28	33	14	25	90
503	0.78	10.0	51.8	37.4	49.6	58	34	5	20	64
504	0.46	9.3	55.6	48.5	57.4	27	12	2	6	2
631	0.72	6.0	61.8	49.9	84.4	38	4	1	2	2

The passage on which the question is based begins: "Les syndicats veulent travailler moins," and there is mention of the 35-hour week. Answer a. is correct, and it is worth noting that, except in 501, it was the most frequently chosen answer. Answer b. misled a significant number, for the passage contains the expression "sans diminution de salaire," which led many to make an erroneous assumption. Answers c. and d. find echos in the passage, but would not be misleading except to those who were scanning the passage rapidly for clues.

We are eagerly awaiting the results of the retake at the end of the semester. There were problems at the beginning of the semester with the administration of the oral part of the test and we hope that if we change that, there will be a greater number of students finishing the exam. The diagnostic test has proved to be an instrument which we can use not only to place students but also to reflect on what we are doing in our courses and how we might change things to facilitate our students' ability to function in French. For that reason, we recommend such a test to other faculties.